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ORNAMENTING THE BODY –  
CREATIVE PRACTICE EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP  
OF THE BODY POLITIC AND SPACE

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# ORNAMENTING THE BODY – CREATIVE PRACTICE EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE BODY POLITIC AND SPACE

Gina Hochstein

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I set out to explore the multiple facets connecting the politics of space to the politics of bodies. Objects surround our bodies, sized to varying scales. We wear and display them. They are all crafted and designed, yet we fail to acknowledge the political significance of our engagement with them. The political dimension is evident in the design process. Regardless of an object's scale – even architecture can be viewed as a form of object – its design is typically tailored to a single standardised body.

Scale is a constraint for both jewellery and architecture. Both are designed and bound by spatial context, and the body is the inherent factor to which scale relates, including consideration of how the body moves within space. Small and monumental spaces alike use the human form as a reference point.

This paper explores the ways that scale shifts and adapts in relation to the emotional realm by examining the utilitarian and societal functions of objects and imagining and reproducing pieces that are made visually.

I analyse pieces of my creative practice that explore the spatial practices that emerged across the span from craft to building, developing what can be called a 'body politic,' one that uniquely welds landscape concerns with corporeal–expressive repertoires that test and afford modes of belonging and identity in complex ways. My creative practice research investigates the complex intersection of craft practices and architecture in the context of a consolidating émigré community that made its home in Titirangi, Aotearoa New Zealand, in the 1950s.

My focus is on the suburb of Titirangi in West Auckland, named by Māori as the "fringe of heaven," in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. This association comes from the forested coastal range that separates the Tāmaki Isthmus on which Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland has been established, from the exposed Tasman Sea to the west. Titirangi is known for the high rainfall that the separating range draws from the Tasman weather patterns. The suburb is also known for its diverse social character; formed since the 1950s as an enclave of intellectuals, arts practitioners and their newly built modernist houses for which design, painting, sculpture, furniture, ceramics and weaving were binding referents in shaping counter-suburban lifestyles.

A key facet in my research is the convening of a creative community of women makers linked to European migration in Titirangi through the 1950s and 1960s. This is familiar territory for me, as I grew up in this environment, and my parents, themselves immigrants from Europe, likewise knew and socialised with this community more broadly. The establishment of creative careers and home far from Europe, had a notable effect on design and art practice here, no less than it linked the newly consolidating suburb of Titirangi on the slopes of the Waitakere Ranges with a certain bohemianism and lifestyle that ran counter to the homogeneity and social conformity typifying suburbanisation elsewhere across Auckland's Tāmaki Isthmus at this time.

My creative practice aims to explore the spatial practices that emerged across this historical period, spanning craft and building, where my pieces, as body ornaments, are designed to reflect how women occupied space in these modernist houses and understand why ornamentation is of such value. Modernism in the 1950s and 1960s elevated the profile of women in the domestic sphere from the isolated kitchen into an open-plan environment that shifted the gender dynamic by way of aesthetics that were mirrored in interior and exterior architectural schemes.

A core idea of my practice is to connect the history of domestic space with broader, macro-level histories. Design history, often not viewed as political, can be intertwined with nation-building and democratisation, as I aim to illustrate through my creative outcomes in this paper:

## ARCHITECTURE / JEWELLERY

Modernism led to a change in roles for women who, in the pre-feminist period, were often viewed as domestic home-keepers. On occasion, they were themselves understood as objects of desire, an objectification further underscored by the wearing of jewellery. Yet jewellery and architecture in its modernist reframing sets up new relationships to the decorative and the dwelling. Women themselves began to reshape and determine living and working in spaces that were aspirational and open to structural innovations. Modernism considered the possibility that design and technology would transform society, raising standards of living and initiating a future for women where feminism had an opportunity to flourish.

Architecture is not isolated; there is a connection to the natural environment and the surrounding buildings.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, jewellery has a connection to the body, with movement and placement. Architecture and jewellery are both spatial arts practices that attend to surfaces, territoriality and placement. Both architecture and jewellery share the importance of site, location and setting. Just as landscape has colour, surface, shape and texture, so does the human body. A dwelling, by its nature, is bound and sited on the landscape as jewellery is placed and worn on the body.

Architectural intent is more than decoration; it comes from shaping form and crafting spaces with considered materials and is balanced between practicality and art. By using aesthetics sensitively, architecture can elicit profound and abstruse emotions, as can jewellery. Both relate to the human form, in contrast to other art forms that one is unable to inhabit or wear. Architectural objects have three-dimensional form, scaled to interface with the body and are inhabited within. Both architecture and jewellery can become objects of joy and delight and have a relationship to their setting, be it the landscape or body form. Wilhelm Lindemann's *Thinking Jewellery* (2011) clarified my thinking about jewellery and its context in cultural history.<sup>2</sup> Here, the theory of "auteur jewellery" is used to examine the traditional decorative function of jewellery, its social implications and the development of jewellery as an art form.

## TITIRANGI

Given this context, and beneath ideals of image-commodification, I seek to articulate the recalled realities of a female Titirangi community similarly dwelling within and bringing about modernist counter-dwelling. On the bush-clad slopes of Titirangi, the lived experience of domestic International Style modernism mostly eluded the media gaze. The International Style arrived in this context via émigrés and a few local modernist architects who collectively engendered a significant cluster of locally adapted modernist houses.<sup>3</sup> Titirangi has hosted a cosmopolitan and design-aware community that was less concerned with status and happier to engage with the new architectural language. Louis McIvor recalls that "creativity and the aesthetic feeling in Titirangi was quite remarkable and very unusual at the time."<sup>4</sup>

The city fringes and its cheap land, with often difficult sites, attracted an artistic community with a taste for architectural and artistic experimentation. Modernism and its architectural concepts offered integration of all arts. The extensive creative community living in Titirangi in the 1950s included Tibor Donner, Len Castle, Doris Lusk,

John Crichton, Lois McIvor, Maurice Shadbolt and Colin McCahon, who all explored modernism in their different creative fields. Modernism and its practitioners in Tiritangi have been the focus of exhibitions such as the Auckland Art Gallery's "1950s Show" in 1993 and (former) Lopdell Gallery's "Western Lights" exhibition in 1992. This artistic community joined in merging the new architectural language with other aspects of the arts including painting, sculpture, furniture, ceramics, writing and weaving.

Building primarily on recollections of Tiritangi women, my thesis aims to uncover the complexity and agency that this emerging community and spatial enclave permitted – a subject which oral history-making, as a growing form of architectural research, is particularly well suited to articulate. My work has also given me the opportunity to further examine my subject at the varying scales carried by bodies and houses through multidisciplinary fields combining research, oral history and making.

## PIECES

I look to Andrew M Jones and Nicole Boivin, who write about how artefacts "have agency."<sup>5</sup> I believe we can construct meaning in relation to an object and, furthermore, can embody material culture through representational qualities. This aspect is clarified by Arthur Berger, who maintains that imputing an agentive power to an object and attributing meaning to it is fetishism, pure and simple. However, cultural studies has shown that objects' meanings are not intrinsic features of the objects themselves, but are bestowed upon them in the context of specific relations.<sup>6</sup>

### Copper Head Wrap

My core concept is that art is a form of action and that making art provides meaning and is associated with aesthetic experiences. When a precious object is worn on the body, the inference is that it becomes jewellery. By my making and presenting work in an exhibition format, I seek to demonstrate that my art is a form of action and inhabits the space of material culture. Each disc in this piece represents a woman's story and is a connector of language. Language used as a connector needs to be interrogated; otherwise, it may conceal further differences. It is a way to examine my thinking about the community at the core of my research. The relationships between people and their visible and invisible needs may mesh, weave or interconnect, yet differ in either their starting or end point.

With *Copper Head Wrap*, I seek to better understand the notion that objects can touch, feel, smell and hear one another. The idea is to wrap this piece around your head and feel the cool metal strips pressing in and across your skin and hair.

The modalities of communication between my work and the community are the commonalities of language and self-expression between jewellery and modernism in this design-rich enclave. The steel and glass modernist house is an outward expression of identity; but so at a lesser, but no less important, scale is the wearing of jewellery or any other form of personal adornment.



Figure 1. Copper head wrap.  
Copper and brass solder.  
Model: Jess O'Reilly. Image: Emma Bass.

## The Landscape Ring

*The Landscape Ring* examines the sloping, bush-covered sites that characterise the Titirangi area, where many important mid-century houses were built,<sup>7</sup> affording significant architectural innovation, as highlighted in 2008 by Bill McKay's *Block Itinerary* No. 13.<sup>8</sup> The ring is made with lapis lazuli, fine silver and bezel-cut shapes to acknowledge the terrain of Titirangi that leads down to the surrounding bays and sea. Some taller elements are intended to acknowledge how land was divided up into buildable rectangle sections. These have smooth sides, and the use of lapis acknowledges the layered geology beneath, with the steep building sites above.

I link the blue in lapis to the term "heaven" within the translation of Titirangi. *The Landscape Ring* is sizeable (in plan it covers three fingers) and, though smooth to the touch, does not allow for the fingers to sit comfortably on either side. This is a nod to the tensions created by colonialism and the limited land that the local iwi, Te Kawerau a Maki, the Māori tribe, have to their own ancestral land. In Māori tradition body and land have a profound relationship. Papatūānuku is considered mother, earthbound to the land, and is seen as the birthplace of humankind. Land claimed was also customarily named after parts of the body by tangata whenua. For example, the chief Tia saw the location named Rangioru and called the hills and the land to the south "the belly of Tapuika."<sup>9</sup>

## The Corset Ring

In terms of theory, I respond to Beatriz Colomina who considers that an interior space has traces left by a former occupant,<sup>10</sup> by way of an extension of Walter Benjamin's saying that "To live is to leave traces."<sup>11</sup>

I wanted to create a ring to be worn on the traditional wedding ring finger that could leave a trace of the stories of a gendered way of living post-second-wave feminism in Titirangi during the 1960s. My conversations with the women involved discussed the roles of being a mother, wife and creative. All had their creative work firmly placed in third position, after the responsibilities of mother and wife. At this time, prior to the second wave of feminism, being a wife according to Sara Ahmed was "to accommodate yourself to someone else's story, a story in which you are not an artist."<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2. Landscape Ring.  
Pure silver; Lapis lazuli, resin and 999 gold.  
Model: Isabella. Image: Emma Bass.



Figure 3. Corset Ring.  
Pure silver and 50% copper/50% silver alloy.  
Model: Isabella. Image: Emma Bass.

Researching corsets and lingerie in New Zealand during this time suggests that fashion no longer required a corset and whalebone structure to be worn daily. In 1953, for the first time a full-colour Berlei lingerie advertisement was printed on the back cover of *The Mirror*. It features nylon bras and girdles (not corsets) prominently displayed in pure white.<sup>13</sup> While these Titirangi women understood what wearing a corset had meant to their mothers and felt sufficiently emancipated to wear lingerie for comfort, they felt that a corset was designed to reshape the body and constrict the waist into an idealised form or shape.

In *The Corset Ring*, I was responding to the idea of constriction or lack of comfort in an undergarment and, through sketching, suggested this as a metaphor for these women's creative output being socially relegated to an inferior position.

Based on my sketching, the stays extended beyond the end of the finger and are held firm in smaller and smaller wedding rings, suggesting that the further from the wedding ring finger, the more air the stays have between them. As an elongated element, the "texxtured" (see below) ring component restricts the ability to bend the proximal interphalangeal joint or the first finger joint. The bodily sensation of constricting natural bending movement and having a ring that extends past the natural extremity is intended to deepen our understanding of the gender roles of a married woman during this period of modernism who wished to play a more prominent creative role in her life. In the production of *The Corset Ring*, the ideology of my personal feminist praxis is unpacked and reveals the thinking and making process behind my work.

## THE BODY POLITICS OF SPACE

In his book *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre classifies space into various spatial representations where "lived space" corresponds to a tangible engagement with space, "conceived space" is a representation of space, and "perceived space" is composed of representational spaces which are experienced through images and culture.<sup>14</sup> All of these definitions are nuanced and yet when put together, it is only through the body that perception of space and, therefore, location can be experienced. Fingers and knuckles covered by skin form the terrain where a ring or jewellery piece is sited architectonically. The ring rests on a finger; yet if the ring is taken off and displayed in a museum, the same ring no longer carries an architectonic connotation. However, the mark of the absent ring on the skin, caused by oxidisation, leaves a green tone where the ring once was and patinas the body. This also applies to metal elements that adorn buildings and leave a stain that can still be recognised as a "shadow ornament."

For this reason I believe that jewellery can be intensely personal. Hence, the ring finger, through the impression of the flesh, becomes ornamented with the outline of the wedding ring that once adorned it. This is my personal embellishment or "texxture," where I still have a groove left from many years of marriage which continues to ornament my body. This essential haptic quality of a wedding ring gives us a memory of time and place. In Renu Bora's essay "Outing Texture," the term texture becomes "texxture" with an extra 'x'.<sup>15</sup> Dense with symbolism and texxture, the ring inherently references an event and emotion accompanying that event – in this case, a wedding. The location is one's wedding ring finger, and the contact with our body intensifies its communicative value.<sup>16</sup> Jewellery can be a mnemonic symbol where the piece brings back recollections of a time or place when it was purchased, given or worn.<sup>17</sup>

## THE BODY AS EXHIBITION SPACE

The act of wearing and the inherent knowledge it carries have emerged as central themes and areas of exploration in this essay. I look to Lisa Walker's work which, I believe, exemplifies how jewellery can be inherent in almost anything. While she challenges conventional assumptions and demonstrates that everything can be made "wearable," she also offers an intellectual commentary on value, consumption and our emotional connections to objects.<sup>18</sup>

Architecture and jewellery share an emphasis on the importance of site, location and setting. According to architectural historian Mark Wigley, "buildings are worn rather than simply occupied,"<sup>19</sup> and the complex relationship embodied in the term "wearing" connects jewellery and architecture. If the human body is seen as a site for the display of jewellery, it becomes a site-specific habitation. Thus, a ring can be worn only on a certain finger with a specific dimension; it therefore cannot be worn by others (who have bigger or smaller fingers) or on a wrist as a bracelet.

## CONCLUSION

My pieces are to be seen as innately architectural jewellery – by this I mean that my output is inextricably informed by a common understanding of form, function and making. Both building projects and artworks embody a purity of purpose in addressing the requirements and needs of their inhabitants; my pieces exemplify an architectural aesthetic of functionalism. Examining my jewellery in conjunction with architecture helps to reframe perspectives on jewellery practice, encouraging us to view art as ornamentation of the body and also as a form of construction. Even without changing our viewpoint as radically as this, parallels emerge between architecture and jewellery as constructed objects.

I hope that the politics of gender embodied in my pieces will be viewed through the lens of both conscious or unconscious agency, with the aim of making a mark for the creative modernist women of Titirangi and moving the viewer or wearer emotionally.

**Gina Hochstein** comes with practice-based and academic publication experience. She is a Lecturer at Unitec, whilst finishing her PhD at the University of Auckland. Her PhD by creative practice combines research and written scholarship with a creative output investigating the complex intersection of craft practices and architecture which results in items of adornment on the female form for an exhibition.

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